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ABSTRACT

This study examined ratings of program quality and cooperation made by parents and staff from three types of Swedish preschools: (1) run by the local government; (2) run by private parent cooperatives; and (3) private enterprises. Questionnaires with open-ended and closed questions were used to collect data. The same questions were asked once a year, between 1992 and 1994. Results indicated that parents were fairly satisfied with the quality of their child's preschool, with parents of children in the cooperative schools the most satisfied. Parents were most satisfied with their child's contact with the staff and their child's daily routines at the school. The aspect of school receiving the lowest rating by parents was the extent to which their child could rest at preschool. Staff regarded the quality of their services to be good. They were most critical of their ability to pay enough attention to individual children and the amount of time for excursions. Staff generally rated services higher than did parents, with the differences more marked in the preschools run by local governments and private enterprise than by parent cooperatives. Parents in parent cooperative preschools rated cooperation between parents and staff higher than the other types of preschools. PTA meetings did not receive high ratings for cooperation. Parents in local government run preschools and private enterprise preschools were least satisfied with the documentation of their child's work at school. Parents in smaller preschools were more satisfied with their influence on the content of the preschool than were parents in larger preschools. (Contains 17 references.) (KB)

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Parent View of Pre-school Content

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Parent View of Pre-school Content

Background

During recent years a shift in ideology combined with a marked economical recession has influenced the Swedish pre-school in various ways (the concept "pre-school " is used here to describe the main form as weil as the local institution). This has affected its content as well as the organizational conditions. The ideological shift can be summarized in the catchword "revolution of freedom to choose". This meant that market oriented situations should be established, where the parent would have the opportunity to choose which pre-school they would like for their child. Such a situation implicated that there was a sufficient number of pre-schools and also different forms to actually choose among. In such a vision there also should be a certain degree of competition between various institutions to establish a balance of supply and demand. The pre-condition was thus a pre-school that could provide enough places to meet the needs. If we look at the situation in the country as a whole, such a condition did not exist in many local authorities or regions. But in Stockholm this was a reality.

To encourage such development the government stimulated "new forms" of pre-schools. This was also done from the local political level. Pre-school now was allowed to be run as private enterprise. Another form that had a little longer tradition was pre-schools run by the parents themselves as parents-cooperatives. In Stockholm as well as in other bigger cities the parents-cooperative form had grown when parents with "know-how" wanted to take their own children´s pre-school placement situation into their own hands. The traditional pre-school, though, run by the local authority remained the main form (and still is). In Stockholm though the proportions in certain parts of the town between "private" and public type of pre-schools was equal, in some districts the private share has grown to be the largest one. All forms of pre-schools have their main funding from the local authority on an equal basis and is also under supervision from it.

The changes in the pre-school sector also had other implications. The decentralization was further stressed. Each pre-school should be as independent as possible and adjust to the local conditions. The most important aspect here is of course the parent's needs for child care. In Stockholm the funding was via a "pouch of money" the size of which depended on how many children there were in the institution. The effectiveness of the unit was also stressed which in effect means to have as many children as possible being taken care of for the available money. The clear instruction to the local leaders was to keep within the budget. At the same time budget cuts were to be made without decrease in quality of work. On the other hand, quality was seen as a key factor to develop the local work and to increase the ability to compete with other pre-schools. How such changes in the organizational context affect the pedagogical work and the content of the pre-school has been studied in a separate study in Stockholm (Johansson 1995, Sjöberg 1995)

Parents-influence and cooperation, can be regarded as an essential part in this process.

The Study

How the content of the pre-school is perceived by the parents is crucial for their judgement of its quality. When the staff try to improve quality, their experiences of parent's judgements are important. Quality can in this respect be seen as a process that changes from one time to another and is highly dependent on the relation between judgements from the parents and the staff (Johansson 1993, Moss & Pence 1994). The conclusion from such a way to describe quality is that the parents and the staff must first create their own picture of the pre-school content, and when they have done so, discuss this with the other part and compare. How well does one picture fit the other? Especially in those aspects that do not fit, quality could expect to be improved. The main sign of good quality is in this perspective when there is congruence in the judgements from both parents and staff.

The aim of the study was to see how parents and staff from various forms of pre-schools judge quality and cooperation in the service they are involved in.

The following aspect was asked about:

* The quality of the pre-school content
* The support from the pre-school for the parents and their child(ren)
* Work according to the principles in the educational programme for the Swedish

pre-school (nature, culture and society)
* The parents -cooperation and influence

Design

The groups were asked by questionnaires mainly with fixed items, some questions were open (we also interviewed the local pre-school director, but this part of the study is not finished yet).

The same questions were asked once a year, between 1992 and 1994. The first year only pre-schools run by the local authority were included. The data comes from one of the social districts in Stockholm. The district is located in the centre of the city and includs a comparatively high proportion privately run pre-schools (in fact the highest). This allows comparisons over time and also between various forms of pre-schools.

The sample consists of 50 % randomly sampled institutions among those run by the local authority (11 out of 22) and parents cooperatives (9 out of 18). Among the pre-schools run by a private enterprise, five out of eleven were randomly sampled.
In the sampled pre-schools all personnel working in the groups were asked (those with steady employment). Among the parents, 50 % from the selected pre-schools were randomly sampled. This design means that the sample of both institutions and individuals varies from one occasion to another.

Response rates vary between groups and occasion, from app. 60 % among the parents, to approximately 65 % among the staff. Such response rates are fairly common in inquiries by questionnaires in the Swedish pre-school today. The interpretations of the results should be done in the light of this level of mortality.

RESULTS

The results from the study are presented in detail in three reports (Olsson 1993, Hellqvist 1994, 1995). The space here allows just a strict selection and summaries. The presentations focus on the last results from 1995.

The parents view of quality in the pre-school. The items about quality come from

the description in the national educational program of the concept. The focus is on the relations between staff-child-parents and the childs´ ability to adjust to the pre-school setting. How does the child like to go there, and what characterizes the setting? We also asked about in what respect the pre-school offers a stimulating and safe environment, pedagogic materiel etc.

This table summarizes the parents answers in this aspect (last sampling):
Pre-school run by the local authority= LA
Parents cooperative= PA
Private enterprise=PE

Table 1. The parents rating of quality (percent)
LA (n=122) PC (n=36) PE (n=67)

Item	tot.agree	agree	disagr.	tot.disagre	no opinion
My child has good contact with the staff	LA:68 PC:86 PE:71	LA:30 PC:14 PE:26	LA:1 PC:0 PE:2	LA:0 PC:0 PE:1	LA:1 PC:0 PE:0
My child is pleased with the routines	LA:65 PC:72 PE:93	LA:31 PC:8 PE:24	LA:1 PC:0 PE:2	LA:1 PC:0 PE:1	LA:2 PC:0 PE:0
Pre-school is a safe place to be in	LA:44 PC:86 PE:63	LA:50 PC:14 PE:32	LA:6 PC:0 PE:3	LA:0 PC:0 PE:0	LA:0 PC:0 PE:2
The staff listen with a sensitive ear	LA:47 PC:72 PE:58	LA:46 PC:25 PE:39	LA:3 PC:3 PE:3	LA:0 PC:0 PE:0	LA:4 PC:0 PE:0
The pre-school provides interest-ing material	LA:50 PC:92 PE:58	LA:42 PC:8 PE:34	LA:4 PC:0 PE:5	LA:2 PC:0 PE:2	LA:2 PC:0 PE:1
The staff takes good notice of my child	LA:36 PC:69 PE:52	LA:50 PC:22 PE:40	LA:5 PC:6 PE:3	LA:0 PC:0 PE:2	LA:9 PC:3 PE:3
The staff encour-age and stimulate the children	LA:38 PC:89 PE:57	LA:45 PC:8 PE:32	LA:4 PC:3 PE:2	LA:2 PC:0 PE:3	LA:11 PC:0 PE:6
The pre-school have good rules and routines	LA:42 PC:72 PE:49	LA:40 PC:28 PE:36	LA:4 PC:0 PE:3	LA:2 PC:0 PE:3	LA:12 PC:0 PE:9
My child gets good and nutritious food	LA:41 PC:58 PE:50	LA:37 PC:36 PE:42	LA:3 PC:3 PE:2	LA:2 PC:3 PE:1	LA:18 PC:0 PE:5
The material has high pedagogic quality	LA:33 PC:83 PE:33	LA:40 PC:14 PE:42	LA:8 PC:3 PE:10	LA:0 PC:0 PE:3	LA:19 PC:0 PE:12
My child can rest in the pre-school	LA:33 PC:69 PE:45	LA:38 PC:22 PE:39	LA:13 PC:6 PE:1	LA:6 PC:0 PE:3	LA:10 PC:3 PE:12

The results show that parents are fairly satisfied with the quality in the aspects they were asked about. It is the same pattern in all forms. Parents with their child in a cooperative are the most satisfied. Then follow those parents from private enterprises. Parents with children in institutions run by the local authority have the comparatively lowest rates. On the whole the parents are most satisfied with the aspects that their child has good contact with the staff and that it also is satisfied with the routines there.

The proportion of "no opinion" is relatively frequent among the parents with their child in LA.

The aspect that parents rate the lowest, is the one saying that the child can rest in the pre-school. Both parents with their child in LA and PE are those who are least satisfied with the pedagogic quality of the material provided in pre-school.

Compared to the previous year this is the same tendency. The main trend though, is that the gap between LA and the other forms decreases. We can see this especially in those aspects that is about the relations between the child and the staff. A circumstance that maybe could influence this, is that many pre-schools tried to meet the increased number of children in their groups by orientation against working with children in small groups (3-5) and often also with groups consisting of children in the same age (Sjöberg 1995). In this respect there are no differences due to the size of the pre-school.

How does the staff regard quality in their work? In the following table the staff's ratings are summarized. The figures are from the rating in 1995.

Table 2. The staffs rating of quality (percent) LA (n=48) PC (n=14) PE (n=32)				
Item	tot. agree	agree	disagree	tot. disagee
Our pre-school has well functioning routines	LA: 83 PC: 85 PE: 84	LA: 15 PC: 15 PE: 16	LA:0 PC:0 PE:0	LA:2 PC:0 PE:0
We use material that develops and stimulates the children	LA: 44 PC: 92 PE: 45	LA: 54 PC: 8 PE: 55	LA:2 PC:0 PE:0	LA:0 PC:0 PE:0
We encourage and stimulate the children's play	LA: 59 PC: 46 PE: 48	LA: 39 PC: 54 PE: 52	LA:2 PC:0 PE:0	LA:0 PC:0 PE:0
We provide good and nutritious food in our pre-school	LA: 63 PC: 62 PE: 45	LA: 33 PC: 38 PE: 52	LA:4 PC:0 PE:3	LA:0 PC:0 PE:0
I know what every child need to develop	LA: 52 PC: 54 PE: 45	LA: 41 PC: 46 PE: 55	LA:7 PC:0 PE:0	LA:0 PC:0 PE:0
There are possibilities for the children to rest in the pre-school	LA: 55 PC: 69 PE: 39	LA: 37 PC: 31 PE: 58	LA:4 PC:0 PE:3	LA:4 PC:0 PE:0
I take enough notice of every child	LA: 22 PC: 38 PE: 19	LA: 59 PC: 62 PE: 65	LA:13 PC:0 PE:16	LA:6 PC:0 PE:0
We spend sufficient time on excursions, go to museums, theatres etc.	LA: 34 PC: 22 PE: 69	LA: 37 PC: 38 PE: 12	LA:18 PC:0 PE:19	LA:11 PC:0 PE:0

This table show that staff rate most of these items high. They regard the quality in their services to be good. The aspect that the staff are most critical to, is the one about to take notice of every child and the one about excursions. This could be due to the increased number of children in the groups, also more small children (under age three) and dire budget condition. This picture becomes more marked the last year of the study compared to the first.

Compared to the parents, the staff generally has higher rates on the quality. This result is more marked in the LA and PE. In the parents-cooperative the picture is more heterogenous. The differences are smaller and in some aspects the staff are more critical then parents, for example in the aspects concerning to take notice of every child and to encourage and stimulate play.

Staff in a PC are more satisfied with the quality than in the other forms. But the differences are small. Much smaller compared to the parents view. The clearest difference is in the aspect about the use of material that develops and stimulates the children. This is interesting to compare with the aspect meaning to encourage and stimulate the children´s play, where the PC staff has lower ratings than those in other forms. Are the staff in a PC more oriented to use material instead of other forms of activities (and relations) than those who are working in other forms? A thing that maybe could be of influence here is the higher proportion of small children in the PC groups. Probably it does so in the aspect of -going on excursions.

Parent cooperation. The concept of cooperation is wide and includes a lot. One definition done by a Swedish researcher (Ullman 1984), emphasizes the mutuality. *Parent-cooperation means all mutual contact between home and pre-school which contribute to connect the settings for the child (a. a. p1-2).* In this study we operationalized the content of cooperation in some items. Most of them were rated by both groups They are:

* Good atmosphere between staff and parents
* The wishes of the parents are met (parents)
* We do our best to meet the parents wishes (staff)
* Good cooperation between parents and staff
* Fruitful and constructive PTA. meetings
* Fruitful and constructive talks about the child's situation in pre-school
* Good documentation (parents)
* The parents get enough information of what happens in the pre-school (staff)
* High attendance in PTA. meetings

In the next table the proportions of ratings meaning total agreement for both groups are summarized. The figures are from the last rating in 1995.

Table 3. The parents and staffs rating of cooperation. (Percent) PLA (n=122) PPC (n=36) PPE (n=67), SLA (n=48) SPC (n=14) SPE (n=32)		
Item	Par.tot. agree	Staff tot.agree
Good atmosphere between staff and parents	LA: 52 PC: 83 PE: 62	LA: 57 PC: 61 PE: 68
The wishes of the parents are met (p) We do our best to meet the parent wishes (s)	LA: 39 PC: 69 PE: 62	LA: 44 PC: 46 PE: 42
Good cooperation between parents and staff	LA: 39 PC: 74 PE: 52	LA: 54 PC: 31 PE: 65
Fruitful and constructive PTA. meetings	LA: 21 PC: 54 PE: 29	LA: 44 PC: 31 PE: 68
Fruitful and constructive talks about the child's situation in pre-school	LA: 41 PC: 60 PE: 42	LA: 61 PC: 75 PE: 58
Good documentation (p) The parents get enough information of what happens in the pre-school (s)	LA: 23 PC: 86 PE: 27	LA: 65 PC: 75 PE: 77
High Attendance in PTA. meetings	LA: 17 PC: 62 PE: 45	LA: 43 PC: 62 PE: 68

These results follow the same pattern as could be seen earlier. With two exemptions the parents with their child(ren) in a PC rate cooperation higher than the other forms. The low rate concerning PTA. meetings can maybe depend on other forms of more regular cooperation then such traditional meetings. The LA parents have the lowest rating. Why it is so, we only can speculate upon. One explanation is that the other forms as a regular part of their organisation expects parents to cooperate more than the "tradition" in a LA pre-school does.

The differences in the staffs ratings between the forms are much smaller, although we can see the same picture as earlier discussed. One interesting thing is that the staff believes that the parents get more information than they actually recognize

themselves, especially in LA and PE. The staff in these forms are also much more satisfied with parents' attendance in PTA. meetings and talks about the child's situation in the pre-school than the parents are. On the other hand the parents with children in PC and PE are more satisfied than the staff with the ways their wishes are met. Maybe this has to do with the demands the staff in these "alternative" forms feel, meaning that they have to compete by giving good service and adjust to the parent´s wishes.

The staff in LA says that they are better at informing parents now than in previous years and they are also more satisfied with the PTA. meetings now than before. The aspect where the LA and PE parents are least satisfied is the one about a good documentation of the work in the pre-school.

How do parents and staff look upon influence from parents and the increasing of it? We asked the parents if they would take greater part in, and become more influential on the content of "their" pre-school. The staff got the question, if they on their side, gave the parent opportunity to influence the activities.

The next table shows the answers from parents and staff in this respect.

Table 4: The parents rating of their wish to increase parent influence and the staff opinion on to allow the parents to influence (percent)
(P=parents, S=staff)

P: I would like to have more influence of the content of the pre-school. S:In our team we give the parents opportunity to influence the activities'	Agree	Disagree	No opinion
PLA (n=122) SLA (n=48)	37 59	54 41	9
PPC (n=36) SPC (n=14)	9 77	88 23	3
PPE (n=67) SPE (n=32)	28 74	49 26	23

As we can see, the parents in the LA have the highest proportion that wants to increase their influence. At the same time the LA also has the lowest proportion of the staff that say they give the opportunities to influence. This indicates that the LA

pre-schools have least developed influence from the parents compared to the other forms. Of course this picture is highly dependent on the current degree of influence. As earlier mentioned, the concept of the "alternative" forms included influence from the parents, especially in the parents-cooperatives. The parents also expressed this in their comments on this question. On the question as to whether or not the parents regard themselves as active in the activities of the pre-school, the proportions that answered that they were active in their present situation are in LA 14 %, PC 78 % and PE 33 %.

The interest among the parents in the LA to increase their influence has declined during the study. Does this mean that they are more satisfied with their influence now then before? Results from another study on how parents perceive quality in the pre-school (Olsson 1993) indicate that the more satisfied with the quality in the pre-school the parents are, the less need to influence they express.

We also found a relationship between the size of the pre-school and satisfaction among the parents with their influence. This means that the satisfaction tends to be higher in small units than in the bigger ones (with more than two groups). Most satisfied were parents in a PC with one group of children.

Another question was if the parents were positive to increase their cooperation (Cooperation can be regarded as a "stronger" concept than influence). The proportion who answered that they are positive was like this in various forms; LA 47 % (n=122), PC 25 % (n=36), PE 47 % (n=67). When we asked the staff the same type of question, the proportion of positive answers, were much alike. This means that there seems to be a correspondence between the parents and staff regarding their wishes to increase influence. This would be a good ground to develop cooperation in the future. One trend that contradicts this optimistic conclusion is that staff must stick to more structured and pre-planned activities when the budget cuts lead to more (and younger) children in the groups, without possibilities to increase the number of staff. The flexibility then decreases, and so do the latent possibilities to influence the content from "outside" too. In other words, to handle the situation, the staff must carry out what they have planned on the basis of the actual situation (one day or week). The actual cooperation does not necessarily decrease in such situations, but are directed into certain aspects, for example parents taking part in excursions and other related activities, where support from several grown-ups is needed. The way the staff answered a question about how they perceive the content of parent cooperation,

support this presumption.

Discussion

The results show that on the whole most of the parents are satisfied with the quality and content in the pre-school where they have their child(ren). Especially in the parents-cooperative. One thing that could have impact on this judgement is that there is a real opportunity for them to choose what pre-school they want to have their children in. In a densely populated area, as the one the study was done in, the physical and geographical obstacles are insignificant. Another factor that could bias these interpretations of the parents rating is the psychological principle of what is commonly known as the "cognitive dissonance". This means that if you have to choose, you regard your choice to be the best one. In this case this implicates that the parents normally could be expected to regard the current place for their child in a pre-school as the best choice, especially when they have to communicate it to others.

The parents-cooperative, for ideological reasons, and the private enterprises, for economical reasons, have a strong inclusion of parent cooperation. Other results from studies of the content in parents-cooperatives (Sundell, Ek Lundström, Linderoth & Ståhle 1991) show that the parents there concentrate upon carrying out practical and service-oriented tasks, leaving the pedagogic work to the staff. The "alternative" forms are still rather new and stand for a break in a tradition most of the parents know from their own childhood. This could have the psychological implication that they appear more flexible, without the structure connected with a "traditional" pre-school run by the municipality. Maybe the PC and PE are more attractive to certain groups of parents who have the resources and will to apply for "alternatives".

High ratings of quality and significant influence from the parents go hand in hand. This points at that parents cooperation is a vital and global aspect affecting the overall quality in pre-school. This contrasts other results from research of how pre-school-teachers and parents in other countries, where cooperation with parents was seen as of less importance than other aspects of the pre-schools content (Hujala - Huttunen 1996). Parents in the PC were also more satisfied with their child care, compared to other parents (Hellqvist 1995). To compare parent cooperation in different countries and various cultural context is not easy and should be carefully done, with respect to this near relation between pre-school and local social context.

It also has to do with the role of the family in society and what the pre-school representant in such a macro perspective (Dahlberg & Åsén 1994, Hujala- Huttunen 1996).

The encouraging of more parental involvement in the pre-school, as well as in other public services, have been the tendency in several European countries during recent years (European Commission Network on Child care 1996).

The staff's rating of quality in our study are higher and more consistent than the parents. This more homogenous view could be attributed to the professionality and training of the staff. To experience the quality in ones own service as good, can be regarded as a quality in itself and an important stepping stone to further development. Such a professional and thus probably homogenous attitude, also contributes to explain the minor differences between the ratings from staff working in different forms.

The staff says that certain aspects of cooperation have improved during the project, for example information to parents and PTA. Meetings. On the whole the patterns of results are rather stable from one year to another. Two years are in this respect a rather short period to detect changes or implement new ideas. To get a clearer picture of the tendencies we need at least two years more.

The issue of parent-staff cooperation must be further analysed in the future, also in a more distinct and critical way. The concepts, "influence, cooperation and participation" are not well defined. In goals, programmes and other documents they are often used in an ideological and unproblematic sense (Ståhle 1995). To be studied in "reality", as to how parents, children and staff experience the actual situation, these concepts must be operationalized from practice. What do we actually mean by talking about "influence" or "participation" etc.? In such a perspective this is mainly a question of the nature of the relationship between the persons, defined by their local context. Some results from the present study implicate that the definition made by one stakeholder does not always correspond to the definition made by another.

Such consciousness of the actual conditions to discuss, develop and value parents' regular contacts and exchange with the pre-school lead to critical examination of in what social context this is done. A British researcher (Moss 1996) formulates the dilemma of what many parents of today "ought to do" and "can do".

As the age of having children increases, maternal employment rises, paternal employment remains high and employment falls among older and younger people, we are in a midst of a process in which the economic and social workload is increasingly concentrated on men and women in the 25-49 age group. At the same time, increasing number of children are raised by lone parents. This raises major questions about the balance between employment and family life, and the sharing of employment and family responsibilities between women and men. The critical question for the inclusionary approach as for the many other proposals concerning children's services and education which requires increased parental involvement is: where will parents find the necessary time and energy to be involved? (Moss 1996, p. 27-28).

The time spent on pre-school contacts must compete with many other important things in the "time-puzzle" most families, especially those with small children are involved in and try to solve every day. In the light of such a situation the result from many studies of pre-school as well as school, shows that many parents are, as they see it themselves or the situation experienced by the staff, reluctant to take part in planning and in the pedagogic activities in the services (Axiö 1996, Shen, Pang, Tsoi, Yip & Yung 1994, Ståhle 1995). The staff must play an active part to motivate and create such a situation that really invites parents to engage in the work in "their" pre-school. Findings from a parallel study to ours (Ståhle 1995) found that the parent's cooperation correlated with the staffs attitude to it.

One aspect, still not very well investigated, is what happens to the dynamic in the group when parents actually are present. In a study on this in a parents-cooperative, done by some researchers in California (Smith & Howes 1994) the children's social behaviour was observed in the presence and absence of their parents. When their parents were working in the pre-school, children engaged in less high-level peer play and more low-level peer play than in their parents' absence. In addition, children expressed more negative emotions and spent much less time in the proximity of adults when their parents were at school than when they were not. Such implications of parents' presence in the pre-school should be discussed by the parents and staff together.

The results in our study show that there is a potential to increase parents' cooperation. The traditional forms for such cooperation, like PTA meetings, are not

sufficient. Other and more flexible forms must be developed in the future, which makes parents´ cooperation a natural and continouos part of the daily work in the pre-school.

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